

Icon: To be on earth the heart of God

This icon expresses by means of an image the mystery of the Heart of Christ. It brings before us the events told in John 20:19-29 where Jesus appears to his disciples in the Cenacle after his resurrection. This event appears to be the fullness and the completion of the revelation of the love of God for humanity, a love revealed in the heart of Christ, a personal and universal love which even death cannot destroy.

By the resurrected Jesus showing us his pierced hands and the wound in his side (see John 19:31-37) we discover in person that God loves us with a human heart, in act and in truth, up to the total gift of his life. What is even better, he invites us to become like him and he calls us to share in his mission. The Icon not only reveals to us the love of God for us, but invites us to become what we contemplate.

A Description of the Icon.

Introduction

The icon is divided into two half-hearts: the first of these is on our right hand side and portrays the heart of God. Completely glorified (luminous) it is defined by a very thick red arc, a sign of the New Covenant in the Blood of Christ and in the fire of the Holy Spirit. The Resurrected Jesus occupies the centre of this heart.

The second (half heart) is on the left, embracing the Cenacle building, the Apostles and Mary. It symbolises the heart of the Church, that is to say, the heart of humanity wounded by sin but redeemed by the blood of Christ. It is partly in gold (the upper half) which symbolises divine light, a symbol of grace and holiness... and partly in dark green shadow (the lower half). This is an image of the Church which is at the same time holy as well as made up of sinners moving towards the light of the Kingdom. Through these important people who grace this Icon, the two hearts are directed one towards the other, and go to meet each other. All of the movement in the Icon is part of the momentum which goes from the bottom left hand corner towards the top right hand corner, a movement whereby the hands of the apostles direct our eyes towards the person of Christ. It is thus a raising up of the heart of humanity towards God, while at the same time there is a moving downwards of the heart of God in Jesus towards humanity. The two hearts meet and unite in the person of Mary who truly symbolises the heart of the Church, the heart of each human being.

While Mary fully belongs to the body of the Church, she is already one with the heart of Christ and shares in his glory. Her open hands express her “yes” to God in the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38) which made her the servant of the Lord and the Mother of Christ. In the flesh and blood of her own body the New Covenant between God and Humanity is realised, an eternal Covenant in the person of Christ, true God and true Man. Because of this unique position she is the first to be, on earth, the heart of God.

Jesus

Jesus standing, his arms stretched outwards in embrace and welcome and at the same time reminiscent of the cross, presents his bruised and wounded hands to the disciples. His tunic, partially opened, uncovers the wound in his side. He appears in both his crucified and resurrected state. The wounds which identify him to his disciples are the sign of his humanity, his passion and death. But because they are the wounds of love they become the source of life and re-birth. Through this he reassures us that he will also transform our wounds into a glorified state, because “by his wounds we have been healed” (Isaiah 53:5). Surrounded by light and dressed in a white tunic (a sign of great abundance and perfection) Jesus appears as a loving person. The many folds in his tunic highlight the energy and life which, as the resurrected Christ, he will possess in abundance from now on. The wounds on his hands are representative of us and our sins: “I have carved you into the palm of my hands” (Isaiah

49:16)... “Ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried, ... he was pierced through for our faults, crushed for our sins” (Isaiah 53:4). Yes, we have wounded him by our unbelief, our weakness, our refusals, ... but he makes of these wounds a testimony of his love. By keeping them on his hands in his resurrected, glorified state, he wishes to indicate to us that he wants to keep us in his love, in spite of everything, in spite of our infidelity, just as he keeps in his care the sheep who have strayed and which he has carried back joyfully on his shoulders and which no one will be able to take from him (Isaiah 40:11; John 10:15, 27).

Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

He gives his life for his sheep thus becoming both the priest and the victim of the New Covenant. This is emphasised by the gesture of his right hand. He gestures from his wounded heart and points out to the Church the New Covenant sealed in his blood and the Holy Spirit. (John 19:34) By the same gesture he offers himself to his own people as the Paschal Lamb whose flesh and blood becomes for the believing person true food and true drink for eternal life: “Take and eat; this is my body. Take and drink; this is my blood, the blood of the Covenant which is to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26: 26-29). The Mystery of the Eucharist, evoked in this gesture, renders obsolete the first Covenant, concluded by Moses, as well as the Law (Torah) given on Mount Sinai. The six jars in the bottom right hand corner of the Icon served to hold water for the ritual purifications required by the Law in the past. From now onwards they will be filled with the blood of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit (symbolised by the change from water to wine at the wedding feast of Cana (John 2:1-12). The Saviour offers us his heart as a well or spring from where we can draw life and love in abundance (the woman at the well - John 4:1-42, and the promise of living water - John 7:37-39, which is fulfilled in John 19:31-37). The wound in the side of the resurrected Christ signifies that Jesus is the heart of God on earth. This human wound which comes through death, reveals him to be the Son of God, born of Mary, dead on a cross to save us, and resurrected by the power of the Spirit. He is God-Man with a great open heart in order to welcome us, share with and gather us, because he is God-man with a compassionate, merciful and kind heart (Exodus 3:7-8)

The attitude of Christ - his open hands

These open hands inspire us to listen attentively to his word: “You who are hungry, you who are thirsty, you who are tired... come to me for I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:25ff). It is I, do not be afraid, I give you my peace... receive the Holy Spirit,... be my disciples, ... I will be with you always, even until the end of time,... go out into the whole world, ... as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you, ...(John 20:20ff and Matthew 28:19ff). Is this not the Gospel which we must all embrace?

At Cana (John 2:1-12) his hour had not yet arrived, but now he completes what he began then. The hand stretched out towards the Church invites us to abandon ourselves to him with confidence: “When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself” (John 21:32). The Apostles turn their eyes to “gaze upon him who has been pierced” (John 19:27) and stretch out their hands towards him as a sign of their consent to the Covenant which has been offered. They are there, standing, alive and already renewed by the Spirit who has already transformed their “hearts of stone into hearts of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:25-28). Endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit (represented by the different colours of their clothes) each places their gifts or charisms at the service of the Mission which has been entrusted to them by Jesus. In hope (the dark green colour of their path) they advance towards the Kingdom. They are the Church “en route” towards the resurrected one in whom they recognise the mystery of their own Transfiguration where everything becomes white, or everything becomes complete.

The Person of Mary

Mary walks at the head of the group of Apostles. She is not named, but the three stars which she bears on her forehead and shoulders designate her as “Virgin, Pure and Immaculate”, figure of the Church, spouse of Christ (Ephesians 5:27). She is completely dressed - in the Bible clothes signify the blessing of God, the love in which he enfolds his creature. This is one way of asserting that Mary is without sin, that she is completely clothed with God, down to her feet (red slippers). She is filled with grace and the Holy Spirit.

The red-purple cloak signifies that she is mother of the King of the Universe. It is worn over a blue garment (the colour of faith) in order to signify her lively and unfailing faith, a faith which allows her to receive (welcome) in the name of the Church the Saviour and the salvation which he has come to bring.

The position of Mary in this Icon is most important. She underlines her role as “Woman!” (see John 19:25-27), Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church, a vocation and mission recognised by Jesus himself on Calvary. As a member of the people of God, she is placed between Christ and the Church.

Just as at Cana (Jn 2:1-12), attentive to the needs of all people, she never ceases to present to her Son all of our needs. As educator in the faith, her maternal role is to give us Jesus, to form us in his image, and turn us towards him by recalling to us without ceasing “Do everything which he tells you!” (John 2:5).

But her standing posture before Christ in his crucified attitude, as well as the presence of John at her side, evokes equally the hour when Jesus, dying on the cross, made her the Mother of the Church: “Woman, behold your son...” (John 19:27). Her hands stretched out before him signify Mary’s renewal of her “Yes” to the Covenant. And the Holy Spirit who streams forth from Christ “once he has been lifted up from the earth” comes to rest on her as at the Annunciation. She thus enables the Apostles assembled with her in the Cenacle to undergo the experience of Pentecost and to be in their turn, filled with the Holy Spirit. She gathers behind her the people, the redeemed, the saved, in order to lead them to the Light, the Heart of Christ, the path to the Father and the source of the Holy Spirit.

Through the interplay of the hands of Jesus and Mary, which meet across the red heart (arc) of the Covenant, we realise or come to understand that God has just established, between himself and his people, a close communion, a Covenant of love, in which Mary and the Church are the spouse who give themselves to their spouse, the Lord Jesus Christ. He comes forward to meet his spouse and brings her (Mary and the Church) already into the light, in this way celebrating with the redeemed humanity the wedding feast of the Lamb (Revelations 19:6-8).

While the Church contemplates Jesus in his glory while moving forward to meet him, the Lord sends her (the Church) into the world with the mission to reveal to all people the Love of God which she recognises in the sign of the pierced side. “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you...” (John 20:21). Thus the path that leads to the Heart of God passes through the heart of man, since it is impossible to love God who is seen without loving our brother and sister whom we can see (I John 4:11).

There are other important details about this Icon which will help us to better comprehend the message which it portrays:-

The rectangular shape

The rectangle which contains the Icon symbolises the earth contained by its four cardinal points as well as the altar where the Eucharist is celebrated. Indeed it is on earth (i.e. in each and every one of us) that the mystery of the heart of God is manifested and it is on the altar where it is celebrated.

The Title: “Etre sur terre le coeur de Dieu” - To be on earth the heart of God.

This phrase sums up the special vocation of all those who share in the deep spirituality rooted in the mystery of the Heart of God, a spirituality which challenges us to be for our contemporaries the Heart of God on earth, just as Jesus was.

The Building

This signifies the Cenacle, the place where the depicted event unfolds. But it equally symbolises the Church, that is to say the heart of each believer. Since the heart of the Christian is the heart of the Church, the entire Church is present in the heart of each person. And just as Jesus is present in the heart of the Church, so the Resurrected One is present in each of us. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit, the dwelling place of God, his heart on earth.

The jars

These recall the first Covenant on Sinai and the Law. The fact that they are placed at the bottom of the red bow (arc) means that the New Covenant is about to be fulfilled without abolishing the first Covenant. Moreover, the jars recall the first miracle of Jesus at Cana (John 2:1-12) the miracle in the course of which he began to manifest his glory, more fully revealed at the hour of his glorification - at the moment when, in his death and resurrection, he concluded the New Covenant which was announced and prefigured at Cana

Thomas

Thomas is to be found at the back of the group of disciples. He is beardless and dressed in a deep red colour (symbolising his love for Jesus). Thomas wanted to see Jesus with his wounds - this was rather daring on his part. The rest of us may have wished that the resurrected Christ would have no trace of his wounds, that he would be perfect. Is it not true that we do not wish to be reminded of our sins that sent Jesus to the cross, and that we do not want to bear our wounds in the next life?, that we do not want there to be anything to remind us of the past? In his lack of belief, Thomas betrays a lot of courage and a lot of faith.

The twelfth Apostle

The Icon has only eleven Apostles depicted. Judas is not present. According to the Acts of the Apostles, he has been replaced by Matthias. But this replacement had not yet been made on the evening of the resurrection (the scene depicted in the Icon). This means that the Apostle called to complete the group of twelve is each one of us. Jesus calls us all to be the Heart of God on earth.

The Hands

In the bible, hands express the work that God has to accomplish. By showing them to us, Jesus invites us to share in his mission and to collaborate in his work. We have to work at the task of God in a concrete manner: i.e. with our hands, while at the same time having in us the spirit of love which is in the heart of Christ.

- the hands which are reaching towards each other in the Covenant signify the marriage of Christ and the Church and Mary
- the open hands express welcome, offering, sharing, call, mission.]
- the hands stretching forward express the expectation of humanity, their welcome of the gift of God and their free assent to the Covenant of love.

Conclusion

The Icon presents for our contemplation the passages of the Gospel where Holy Scripture is completely fulfilled. By manifesting to us the mystery of the Heart of God and the mystery of the Church the Icon reveals to us our own vocation. It contains in one image the whole Word of God, the Old and New Testament as well as the complete life of the Church.

Above all, the Icon of Christ, the heart of God on earth, is an Icon of the Paschal Mystery, where the love of God is revealed beyond all measure in the sign of the pierced side. All the mysteries of Christ, both as God and Man, are here expressed: the incarnation, Baptism, Transfiguration, Passion, Death, Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost as well as his mysterious presence in the heart of the Church.

This Icon sums up the whole history of salvation such as it was proclaimed by the prophets, the Law and the principal characters of the Old Testament and all that was portrayed in the person of Jesus: Good Shepherd, Paschal Lamb, Suffering Servant, Light of the World, Prince of Peace, Saviour of the World, Priest and Victim of the New Covenant, Source of the Spirit, etc... Finally, it shows us Jesus who teaches and calls disciples to follow him and share with him in his life and mission.